A WAY WITH WORDS: SELECTIONS FROM THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

JANUARY 19–MARCH 30, 2001

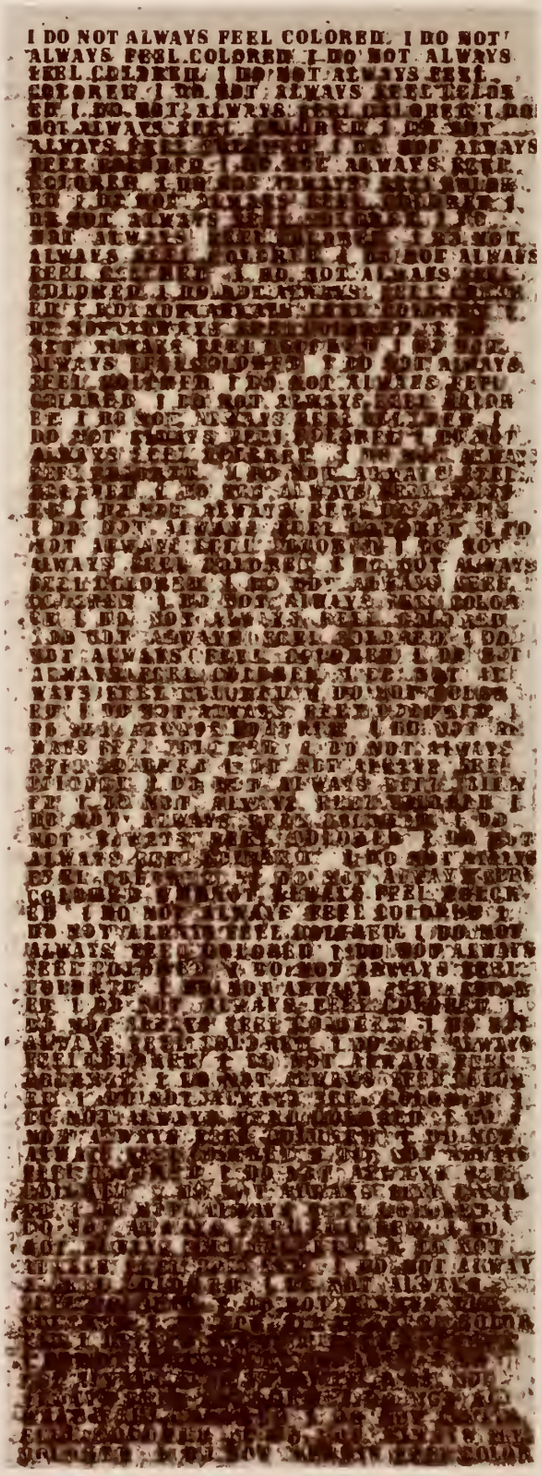
MY COUSIN CANDI'S WEDDING WITH HER TWO FAVORITE CUSTOMERS FROM HER JOB AT THE SIRLOIN STOCKADE.

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris

THE USE OF TEXT in the visual arts stretches back thousands of years, from identifying inscriptions on ancient wall paintings and sculptures, to the inclusion of biblical passages or saints' names in medieval and Renaissance art, to the Cubist incorporation of language fragments drawn from newspapers and product labels. It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century, however, that language became a primary expressive vehicle in the visual arts. The unprecedented centrality of media and advertising imagery in the American postwar economy spurred Pop artists to incorporate language as a reflection of the modern world. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the dominance of language in art and the concomitant subjugation of visual elements reached an extreme interpretation in Conceptual art. Conceptualists maintained that the true locus of art was not the execution, but the idea behind it. Consequently, an art work was complete upon conception, and thus might exist only as textual documentation. In this endeavor, Conceptual artists turned to semiotic theory, which posited a distinction between the signifier—the *form* of a meaningful object, or sign, such as a word or image—and the signified, the *idea* being represented. This distinction enabled Conceptualists to challenge the relationship between the artistic object and the theoretical idea, and to critique how meaning is produced in art. Though artists of the following generation returned to image-based work, they nevertheless expanded the Conceptualists' practice of exposing embedded meaning in images and objects in order to engage in social and political critique.

Contemporary artists continue to build on these traditions. Society is now inundated with visual media that incorporate images and texts, and technological advances have forged ever-new possibilities for visual communication. "A Way with Words," selected from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, includes fourteen works by twelve contemporary artists who employ text as a visual element. The works—by Glenn Ligon, Suzanne McClelland, Shirin Neshat, Raymond Pettibon, Jack Pierson, Lari Pittman, Richard Prince, Lorna Simpson, Alexis Smith, Chris Verene, Carrie Mae Weems, and Christopher Wool—explore the compelling possibilities of word and image from a diversity of perspectives. Taking advantage of the stylistic



Glenn Ligon, *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*, 1990

plurality characteristic of the latter decades of the twentieth century, these artists examine contemporary experience by drawing freely from the complex history of language in the visual arts as well as from literary and popular culture.

Several of the exhibited works appropriate preexisting text or, as Glenn Ligon terms it, "found language." His *Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored)* and *Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)* incorporate short phrases from Zora Neale Hurston's poem "How it feels to be colored me"(1928). Ligon seeks to convey his own visceral reaction to the first-person text through its rendering as a painting. The texts in Ligon's work function simultaneously as the author's voice, the artist's voice, and possibly the voice of the painting itself. Unlike many early Conceptualists, who rejected images in favor of text, Ligon uses the words as images to engage social issues. The stenciled phrases "I am not tragically colored" and "I do not always feel colored" blur and bleed together, melding the black of the soft oil crayon with the gessoed white of the surface in a seductive, lush, yet confrontational synthesis of form and content. The repetition of a single sentence implies both reformation (like a schoolchild's punishment or paths to religious atonement) and positive accomplishment (daily mantras and cheering crowds).

Shirin Neshat, *Unveili*
Women of Allah, 1993

Like Ligon, Shirin Neshat uses literary appropriations in her photographs. In the portrait *Unveiling*, she inks excerpts from the Farsi poetry of Furough Farokhzad, a well-known Iranian feminist poet, directly onto the face of an Islamic woman in a traditional head covering, folded back to expose her face and a portion of her chest. In strict Muslim societies, these parts of the female body are forbidden to be seen in public, and the subject's direct gaze would similarly be perceived as sexually suggestive. Neshat challenges the way that Islamic law is metaphorically inscribed on the body by allowing what is concealed and forbidden to "speak" for itself. The confrontational character of the woman is enhanced by the content of the inscription, an excerpt from the poem "I Feel Sorry for the Garden," in which a neglected garden is used as a metaphor for the mistreatment of women. But the text is made deliberately obscure in Neshat's photograph—created for a non-Farsi-speaking, Western audience—which forces the viewer to question its meaning and underscores the complex ways in which language can both liberate and confine.

Other artists in the exhibition draw from other kinds of cultural texts. In the print *Then*, Suzanne McClelland uses an arbitrary selection of newspaper sections as the underlying structure of the work, and then all but obliterates them with layers of abstract imagery. McClelland's gestural, painterly style reinjects tone and expression into the written word in a visually comprehensible way. This combination confounds the assumed distinction between objective reportage and the subjectivity of emotive abstraction. As in her painted canvases, where spoken words may drift over the surface in all directions, repeat themselves nonsensically, or collapse into unreadable fragments, reading the text in *Then* is less important than experiencing

ıg, from the series

it. The words become material, like the oil paint, clay, enamel, or charcoal McClelland variously employs, and are subordinated to the overall perception of the image.

Richard Prince typically appropriates well-known jokes as part of his work. Like the advertising imagery and copy that he also references, jokes are largely anonymous, familiar, and traditionally "low culture." In his two *Untitled* prints from the portfolio *(no title)*, he assembles recognizable, though unassociated, text and images. Scrambling punchlines and visual sources, he juxtaposes a Playboy bunny-head-turned-skull with an image of a superhero and a repeated joke about two psychiatrists. The seemingly unplanned, handwritten transcription and layered images create a new, albeit opaque, visual language, one whose familiar elements suggest an accessibility that is ultimately denied. In this series, as in much of his work, Prince explores the alienation and disengagement of middle-class American culture with a very American tone, style, and humor.

Christopher Wool also examines ideas of alienation and miscommunication that he perceives as characteristic of contemporary culture. Dispensing with images altogether, Wool, like Ligon, creates art out of words themselves. He applies black alkyd ink with a stencil, combining mechanical and manual processes in a method both impersonal and imperfect. The untitled work in the exhibition treats a single word, "Fear," as its image, directly engaging the viewer in a characteristically abrupt, severe, and aggressive tone. Beyond the mere definition of the word itself, the heavy, blocky letters also suggest meaning by their arrangement. Printed backwards and vertically, though still clearly readable, the word takes on a chaotic, even psychotic, tone. In his text selections, Wool often invokes horrific events in American life, from the fictional representations of fear in horror movies to all-too-real social terrors such as the serial killer Charles Manson.

Rather than using specific texts, Raymond Pettibon plays with recognizable textual forms, in particular, comic books and cartoons. Working primarily on paper, he almost always combines picture and text. Like Prince, however, he denies a correspondence between the two, thereby spurning the normal narrative sequencing of cartoons. In the exhibited print, two spaceships dash about a crowd of planets in mimicry of the naive futuristic style of popular mid-century fantasies of space travel; they even suggest the shape of bombs, as does the text in the speech bubbles above. Pettibon avoids the style of most popular media, where meaning is direct, immediate, and unequivocal and seeks instead associative thinking, preferring to suggest a sequence of ideas only partially detailed in the work. To enhance these connections, he draws from literary and art history as well as from popular culture, citing influences ranging from Goya and William Blake to James Joyce and Marcel Proust. In this work, Pettibon references Homer's *Odyssey*, wryly reimagining the Greek hero's journey as space travel.

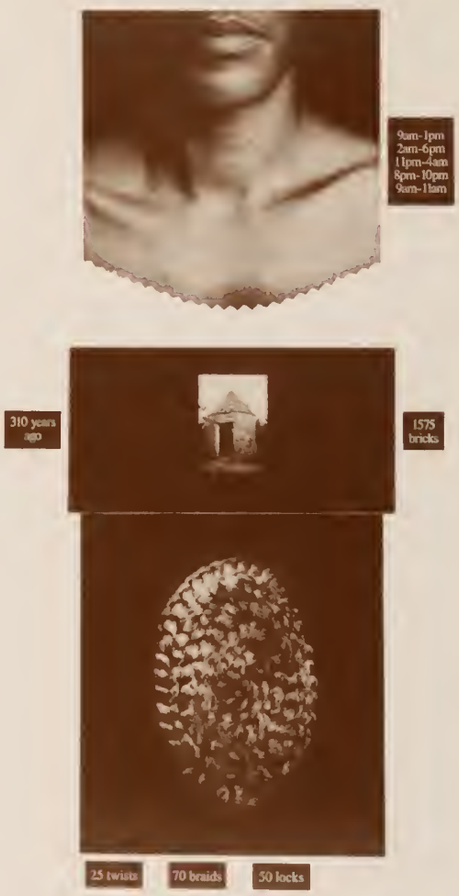
Alexis Smith is inspired by magazines, cartoons, and Hollywood movies. Her hometown of Los Angeles provides the primary source material for works that combine found texts and images to create a new dialogue in a narrative style reminiscent of film. Smith interlaces the myths of modern America that are often enshrined in Hollywood media with specific personal narratives. The collage *Boy's Life* links staged, romanticized images of a child's love of knowledge with a cover portrait of two movie stars caught in a rapturous kiss, excerpts of inspirational texts, and images of collector's stamps. The combined elements allow for multiple interpretations, but characteristically evoke a carefully balanced nostalgia that is simultaneously celebratory and critical.

A similar interest in popular myths of glamour, celebrity, and bittersweet nostalgia informs Jack Pierson's sculptural text constructions, such as *Desire, Despair*. An amalgam of mismatched letters used in old marquee advertisements and other commercial signs, the words intersect at the shared letter S. Pierson's work, like Smith's collages, has a sense of theatricality and suggestion of personal narrative, albeit unexplained. The cross shape formed by the letters alludes to a spiritual quest for fulfillment, while the two words associate abject sadness and unquenchable hope, the polarity of responses to the pursuit of the American dream. The colorful three-dimensionality of the letters engages the viewer physically and aesthetically, and suggests that this haphazard assemblage of discarded objects celebrates America's similarly idiosyncratic composition of people.

Jack Pierson, *Desire, Despair*, 1996

The photographs of Chris Verene also celebrate the myriad eccentricities of American life. Influenced by documentary photographers such as Larry Clark, Verene focuses his camera on his own family or on everyday people of his hometown, as in *Untitled (Galesburg #2)*. A group portrait in an awkwardly posed, pseudo-naive style is captioned with text describing the scene in a manner reminiscent of a family photo album: "My cousin Candi's wedding with her two favorite customers from her job at the Sirloin Stockade." Verene masterfully frames his characters' personalities and captures the evocative details of a particular socioeconomic lifestyle through the choice of text and the specifics of setting, attire, and facial expression. Imbued with an ironic affection, Verene's color-saturated images reveal the underlying dignity of his quirky subjects.

Other artists in the exhibition combine photographs and text with a very different intent. Lorna Simpson, seeking to reconfigure ideas of identity, gender, and ethnicity, characteristically joins fragmented images and words in ways that frustrate familiar methods of reading images. In *Counting*, Simpson stacks three images in a totemic structure, ambiguously annotated with terse statistics that lend an elusive quality to the images and suggest many possible readings. A fragment of a female face and bust sits above an image of a South Carolina smokehouse, a type of structure often used as slave quarters in the past; below is a coil of braided hair. The numerical elements hint at an underlying code but fail to resolve into an overt narrative. Simpson is clearly interested in politicized notions of classification and categorization, the subjectivity of history, and the cultural determination of identity. However, like many of the artists in the exhibition, she requires that the viewer actively participate in the creation of meaning.



Lorna Simpson, *Counting*, 1991

Carrie Mae Weems addresses many of the same issues in her phototext works, though rather than deny traditional presentation, Weems plays into the nostalgia of photographic images and the desire for narrative structure. Like Simpson and Ligon, she has a political agenda, but she is also deeply concerned with the idea of beauty. The formal concerns of *Untitled*, from the *Sea Islands Series*, are an integral part of the overall effect. The series refers to a group of barrier islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, where enslaved Africans and their descendants constitute a majority population. Living in relative isolation, a distinct African-American culture evolved. Drawing on folklore from this culture, Weems' text has a spoken rather than written tone, in the style of a storyteller. The tale, a metaphor of freedom, recounts how African slaves developed the ability to fly and enhances the episodic character of the sharp but silent landscape in the black-and-white photograph. While Weems is interested in the politics of race, she also intends her works to represent universal concerns, speaking across race and class lines to issues of history and identity.

Unlike earlier twentieth-century artists, contemporary artists who use text in their work adhere to no generalized conceptual rules or formal manifestos. Instead, they embrace a wealth of sources—from politics to literature, pop culture to American mythology, religion to Hollywood—to create innovative, visually dynamic images that are, above all, fully engaged with the world.

—Shamim M. Momin

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works are in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width precedes depth.

GLENN LIGON (B. 1960)

Untitled (I Am Not Tragically Colored), 1990
Oil stick and gesso on panel, 80 x 30 1/16 x 1 1/2 (203.2 x 76.4 x 3.8)
Promised gift of The Bohen Foundation in honor of Tom Armstrong P.3.91

Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored), 1990
Oil stick and gesso on panel, 80 x 30 1/16 x 1 1/2 (203.2 x 76.4 x 3.8)
Promised gift of The Bohen Foundation in honor of Tom Armstrong P.2.91

SUZANNE McCLELLAND (B. 1959)

Then, 1993
Color lithograph with screenprint: sheet and image, 22 1/4 x 30 (56.5 x 76.2)
Gift of Robert and Susan Sosnick and Universal Limited Art Editions 95.38

SHIRIN NESHAT (B. 1957)

Unveiling, from the series *Women of Allah*, 1993
Gelatin silver print and ink, 59 3/4 x 39 3/4 (151.8 x 101); photograph by Plauto
Purchase, with funds from the Photography Committee 2000.267

RAYMOND PETTIBON (B. 1957)

Untitled, 1998
Color lithograph with watercolor additions: sheet, 22 1/2 x 40 3/16 (57.2 x 102.1); image, 18 5/8 x 36 1/8 (47.3 x 91.8)
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 98.69

JACK PIERSON (B. 1960)

Desire, Despair, 1996
Metal, plastic, plexiglass, and wood, 117 1/2 x 56 1/4 (298.5 x 142.9) overall
Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 97.102.2a–l

LARI PITTMAN (B. 1952)

Untitled #9 (A Decorated Chronology of Insistence and Resignation), 1992–93
Synthetic polymer and enamel on wood, three units, 168 x 96 (426.7 x 243.8) overall
Purchase, with funds from the Katherine Schmidt Shubert Purchase Fund, the John I.H. Baur Purchase Fund and gift of Rosamund Felsen and Jay Gorney 93.44a–c

RICHARD PRINCE (B. 1949)

Untitled, from the portfolio *(no title)*, 1991
Color lithograph: sheet and image, 15 x 10 15/16 (38.1 x 27.8)
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 92.37.10

Untitled, from the portfolio *(no title)*, 1991
Color lithograph: sheet and image, 15 x 11 (38.1 x 27.9)
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 92.37.11

LORNA SIMPSON (B. 1960)

Counting, 1991
Photogravure and screenprint: sheet and image, 73 3/4 x 37 7/8 (187.3 x 96.2)
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 93.94

ALEXIS SMITH (B. 1949)

Boy's Life, 1989
Lithograph with collage, 30 x 44 3/8 (76.2 x 112.7)
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 92.36

CHRIS VERENE (B. 1969)

Untitled (Galesburg #2), 1997
Chromogenic color print: sheet, 24 x 20 (61 x 50.8); image, 15 1/2 x 15 5/8 (39.4 x 39.7)
Gift of Adair and Joe Massey in honor of Maxwell L. Anderson 00.65

CARRIE MAE WEEMS (B. 1953)

Untitled, from the *Sea Islands Series*, 1992
Gelatin silver print and screenprint: gelatin silver print, 30 1/2 x 30 1/4 (77.5 x 76.8); screenprinted text, 19 3/4 x 19 3/4 (50.2 x 50.2)
Purchase, with funds from the Photography Committee 97.79.2a–b

CHRISTOPHER WOOL (B. 1955)

Untitled, 1990
Alkyd on paper, 73 3/4 x 38 1/8 (187.3 x 96.8)
Purchase, with funds from the Thomas Fountain Purchase Fund and the Drawing Committee 90.20

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue at 42nd Street
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STAFF

Shamim M. Momin
Branch Curator

Molly Larkey
Curatorial Assistant

Jeff Hopkins
Gallery Coordinator, Education

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This brochure accompanies the exhibition "A Way with Words: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art," organized by Shamim M. Momin, branch curator, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

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945 Madison Avenue at 75th Street
New York, NY 10021
www.whitney.org